Roderich Ptak, *Birds and Beasts in Chinese Texts and Trade: Lectures Related to South China and the Overseas World*, Harrassowitz Verlag & Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz GmbH & Co. KG, Wiesbaden (Maritime Asia Volume; 22), 2011, Plates 10, pp. x, 140.

Bin Yang

[Bin Yang is associate professor of History at National University of Singapore. His dissertation "Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE – 20th Century CE)" was awarded by American Historical Association the 2004 Gutenburg E-Prize. He is interested in both Chinese history and world history. He has published research articles in prestigious journals such as Modern Asian Studies*,* The China Quarterly*,* Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, and* Journal of World History*. Contact: hisyang@nus.edu.sg]*

Early and medieval maritime connections between South China and the world is a difficult subject, a conclusion reached from an almost exhaustive exploration of Chinese textual sources. Nevertheless, Roderich Ptak, with his mastery of fragmentary Chinese records, has provided readers with many insights by scrutinizing birds and beasts in the Chinese world. While not all the six chapters of the book are devoted to China's foreign connections, all of them examine animals, birds, and other exotic goods in terms of their documentation and significance in imperial China, and their implications for our understanding of maritime Asia.

The first article deals with notes on animals in Chinese classics, mainly the *Shijing* 诗经 and the *Erya* 尔雅. Ptak contends that "most birds, beasts and other animals in *Shijing* are based on 'real prototypes'," (p. 11) in addition to some other imagined ones. Ptak also discovers that many creatures recorded in these early writings were from non-Han and southern areas, and thus exotic to the Central Plain. A similar textual exploration is found in his third article that collects and analyzes Chinese references to camels in Africa and the Near East from the Tang to the mid-Ming period. Most camels were brought to China via overland routes, and so pre-Song Chinese texts always associated this animal with Inner Asia's deserts. It was not until the Song dynasty when the Chinese expanded their maritime frontiers that their maritime writings began to record camels. Camels were also found in works by travelers in Zheng He's fleets, and their presence indicate the farthest limit of the Chinese maritime world.

The significance of traditional commodities before and after the sixteenth century trans-Pacific network is highlighted in the second article, "The Circulation of Animals and Animal Products in the South and East China Seas." While acknowledging the role of the silk-for-silver trade, Ptak insightfully discusses how the flow of some "traditional" and "seemingly

unimportant" (p. 23) goods, such as calambac, exotic birds, horses, giraffes, skins and horns, musk, ambergris, coral, clams, to list but a few, had shaped maritime Asia with "a much deeper cultural and long-lasting impact" (p. 23) than the silver trade. A *longue durée* perspective in Ptak's analyses, borrowed from Braudel and applied to maritime Asia, has indeed posed a challenge to the role of the silver trade in Asia, and thus Eurocentric periodization of "late medieval" and "early modern" around 1500 (p. 35). An indigenous perspective based in and for Asia hence is necessary to balance the view from Europe when examining maritime Asia, particular of the colonial period.

The fourth article traces the horse trade centering on Hainan Island by collecting and discussing imperial texts during the Song, the Yuan, and the early Ming periods, respectively. Its geographic location caused long-distance trade (both tributary and commercial) to bypass the island. An exception was the local Li groups who paid tribute to the Ming dynasty. Meanwhile, peddling traders catering to a regional market frequented the island. Horses, however, were reported to be transferred from Hainan to other regions such as Champa, and this trade indeed raises questions about both maritime trading routes and Hainan's involvement in international networks.

Birds listed in *Aomen jilue* (Gazetteer of Macao), compiled by two Qing literati in 1751, are examined in the fifth article. Ptak has analyzed the thirteen categories of avifauna one by one, and often traced, compared, and linked their records with those in some other local gazetteers. Many texts, with certain additions and omissions, had early origins, and similar segments are found in other contemporary works. More importantly, the two authors might not have known the meaning of their texts, and most birds recorded were not native to Macao, which indicates an exotic motivation for their entries. It seems that *Aomen jilue* basically still followed principles that guided compilation of imperial gazetteers.

The last chapter turns from Chinese to Jesuit perceptions of exotic animals in Matteo Ricci's *Kunyu wanguo quantu*, Giulio Aleni's *Zhifang waiji* and Ferdinand Verbiest's *Kunyu tushuo*, all three works being successive efforts to present the Chinese audience with the world known to Europeans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the one hand, the three Jesuits with their world maps deliberately copied Chinese names in their choices of toponyms; on the other hand, exotic and fantastic things, often with a European prototype but presented according to Chinese standards, were included too to arouse both Chinese familiarity and curiosity. Such a strategy accounted for their popularity and the occasional textual coping in some Chinese works. Understandably, in many cases, Chinese readers failed to understand the meaning of the Jesuit remarks.

A key topic that many chapters touch upon is the Chinese naming and classification of flora and fauna. The *Shijing* and the *Erya* recorded many animals and birds, and so did many other imperial works. Whether or not the traditional Chinese classification is proto-scientific, moral-oriented, or in-between remains debatable, and this question consequently leads to an important assumption in studying flora and fauna in pre-modern Chinese texts, namely, whether or not modern scientific taxonyms can be projected onto them, and if so, how many of these recorded species can most probably be identified (p. 5). In other words, are we able to tell between the ancient and the modern which is which? The same question indeed has been raised in the field of medical history when studying historical disease-concepts. Two contrasting viewpoints stand out: retrospective diagnosis and historicalist-conceptualist (Adrian Wilson, "On the History of Disease-Concepts: the Case of Pleurisy," *History of Sciences* 38: 271–315). The former as the common practice is also called the "naturalist-realist" approach, which assumes that scientific and medical knowledge exist somewhere in the ontological realm. Thus, scholars can project modern disease concepts on to past disease experiences. The historicalist-conceptualist approach rather starts from the premise that all diseases are historically situated, socially defined, and culturally meaningful. And thus efforts to associate modern scientific disease categories with historical disease-concepts erase the historicity of the latter. Is the same with the terminological mapping of Chinese animal taxonomy?

Fairly evidently, both animal and botanical naming in traditional China, just like disease concepts, are social and cultural constructs. Consequently, projecting modern concepts into history is questionable. Pragmatically, various different diseases may result in the same or similar symptoms, and this makes it almost impossible to form a definite diagnosis of an ancient physician's case, even when circumstantial evidence is taken into consideration. In addition, viruses and bacteria are highly adaptable to external changes, and thus mutation occurs comparatively frequently, even within a very short time-period, considering the length of their life spans. Nevertheless, unlike pre-modern descriptions of symptoms in Chinese medical texts, Chinese records of physical features (especially supplemented with illustrations), living habits, and original habitats seem to make it possible to identify some of the ancient flora and fauna. Put simply, whereas the principle of the naturalist-realist approach may not be acceptable, some attempts to map correspondences may be useful. While Ptak points out that "usually identifications are not possible below the genus level" (p. 106), some of his examinations, for example, are fairly convincing. Generally speaking, with regard to sources, the earlier the record, the vaguer the case, and the more difficult the identification, due to the paucity or the ambiguity (in the case of *jujiu* 雎鳩, pp. 13–15). On the contrary, the more

recent, and the fewer alternatives, the more definite the identification might be (in the case of turkey, pp. 95–96). Paintings and illustrations of birds and animals "almost with photographic exactitude" in the Manchu court drawn by western missionary masters, for example, leave little difficulty in identification (p. 109). And many other cases remain in-between, such as that of *daoguaniao* 倒挂鸟 (pp. 28-29 and 86-89).

Could textual sources on birds and beasts be supplemented by archaeological finds, such as illustrations inscribed on bronze, jade, or stone items? Are there some non-Chinese textual accounts left by medieval foreign travelers such as Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo? And could some of these be supplementary and comparative for our analyses of Chinese texts? Some attempts at answering these points might be worthwhile.

The discussion and application of *longue durée* factors applied to maritime Asia constitute another distinguishing feature of the book. Natural phenomena such as winds and currents belong to these factors, while the rise or fall of kingdoms do not, and the circulation of goods and ideas may fall somewhere in between. Ptak points out that, compared with the modern silk-for-silver trade, many traditional goods in the Chinese maritime world started earlier, and lasted longer than the silver trade. Some of them had their own cultural and political value deeply embedded in daily life. These traditional goods included animals, animal products, and wood items, for instance. Horses, zebra, giraffe, lions, birds, camels, ambergris, corals, and so on, while perhaps not economically profitable, not only fascinated the Chinese, but also made a considerable impression on their daily life. Some were exotic and luxurious, and thus served elites, while many others were for common people. The imports of some goods witnessed fluctuation over time, while that of others remained stable. Their cultural legacies were thus long-lasting and entrenched in coastal societies in East and South China. Such *longue durée* circulations provide a comparison or local variation for Braudel's Mediterranean world. Indeed, European measures, paradigms, or interpretations, when applied to maritime Asia (or any other region) should be adapted by taking into consideration Asian elements and features, as Ptak's current study has revealed.

The book covers a long time span, starting from the first millennium BCE up to the late eighteenth century, and it discusses a broad world with which China was connected over time. While frequent quotations of traditional Chinese texts, at first sight, might be difficult for some readers, subsequent analyses and discussions are full of insights, and make the reading very enjoyable.